

# John T. Flynn

## Profiles in History

[Lou A. Rollins](#)

Born in 1882, in Bladensburg, Maryland, John Thomas Flynn was raised in a Catholic family.

Though he never attended college, Flynn graduated from Georgetown Law School in the early years of the 20th century. While attending law school, Flynn enjoyed listening to Congressional debates on nearby Capitol Hill. One such debate was the January 9, 1900, Beveridge-Hoar Senate debate on the issue of keeping the Philippines under U.S. control. This debate contributed to Flynn's lifelong opposition to imperialism. Indeed, Flynn quoted from this debate in the section on "American Imperialism" in his 1944 book, *As We Go Marching*.

Though he had a law degree, Flynn never practiced law, for he wanted to be a writer. In 1916, he began a writing career with the *New Haven Register*. He soon rose to become city editor of the paper. He moved to the *New York Globe* and was editor and managing editor from 1920 to 1923. After the *Globe* folded in 1923, he became a freelance writer, and eventually had 13 books on business, economics, and politics published.



*John T. Flynn, American journalist, author of "The Roosevelt Myth."* Source: Wikimedia commons. Author Dick Clark Mises. [Official license](#).

Flynn became well known as a liberal journalist by doing a column titled "Other People's Money," the same title as a book by Louis Brandeis. He wrote this column for the *New Republic* from 1933 until November 1940, when it was dropped, apparently because of the noninterventionist sentiments he was expressing in the column. During the 1930s, he was also a Scripps-Howard syndicated columnist, wrote a series, "Plain Economics," which appeared in various newspapers, was associate editor of *Collier's* magazine, and contributed articles to various journals.

Meanwhile, Flynn also worked as a member of the staff of the Pecora Commission, which investigated the stock market in 1933, and he was economic advisor to the Nye Committee, which, in 1934-1935, investigated the World War I profits of munitions manufacturers, the ever-popular "merchants of death." He was also a Fiorello LaGuardia appointee to the New York City Board of Higher Education from 1935 to 1944.

Flynn considered himself a liberal all his life. He defined his liberalism as "not so much a collection of beliefs as a character of mind. It is not far removed from tolerance--not...for men but for ideas." A liberal is a rebel against any kind of dogma, and, he said, his most important quality is "a willingness to examine the ideas of other men and to reexamine his own"

Regarding economics and politics, Flynn's liberalism was influenced by the aforementioned Louis Brandeis and was not pure Jeffersonianism or hard-core libertarianism. Because of the development of cartels and trusts, he believed some government regulation was necessary to prevent monopolies, which he saw as a barrier to new private investment. According to Flynn's daughter, Michele Flynn Stenehjem, in *An American First*, page 28, "If capitalism were to be preserved, he said in 1931, liberal leaders would have to move beyond the Jeffersonian position, take cognizance of the development of cartels and trusts, and actively work with government to make the economic system behave 'as a social economy rather than a racket.'" But he did not want the government to become an economic power itself, and he was not a socialist.

Flynn believed that Herbert Hoover had allowed the Great Depression to occur by his failure to regulate the stock market. (I realize that some revisionists, especially libertarians, will disagree with this explanation of the Depression, but I'm profiling Flynn, not libertarianism.) And so, in 1932, Flynn voted for Franklin Roosevelt for president and against Hoover, who he sarcastically dubbed "the great Miracle Man."

However, Flynn soon became disenchanted with Roosevelt's New Deal, because of Wall Street-connected individuals appointed to positions by FDR, and because of several New Deal programs, including the NRA, which he saw as favoring big business. Flynn was also critical of New Deal deficit spending. He was not absolutely opposed to government spending, but he believed such spending should be paid for out of current government revenues, which could be increased by taxing industries and persons who had taken too large a share of the country's income during the previous forty years. As for deficit spending to raise government revenues, Flynn's daughter says (op. cit., page 30), "He felt that eventually a steadily rising national debt would choke private investment by starving the small investor and cause income to be redistributed from the poor to the rich."

Flynn also came to agree with Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas that Roosevelt was "a born militarist." By 1936, asserted that Roosevelt would "do his best to entangle us" in a coming European war. That year, Flynn voted for Norman Thomas for president as a protest against Roosevelt. Flynn came to believe that Roosevelt was working with conservative, big-business, Wall Street interests to bring about economic recovery based on war scares.

Flynn was influenced by Brandeis in regard to economics and politics. After World War I, Flynn's view of that war was influenced by Philip Gibbs' *Now It Can Be Told* and Harry Elmer Barnes' *The Genesis of the World War*, both of which criticized U. S. intervention in that war. Like many others in the 1930s, Flynn did not want to repeat that mistake in the next war. (One entertaining antiwar group of the 1930s was the college-based Veterans of Future Wars. Their salute was a hand held out to receive a veteran's pension. They argued that they should receive their pensions before the next war because they might be dead by the time it was over.)

To keep America out of the coming war, Flynn and several other intellectual noninterventionists founded the Keep America Out of War Congress in 1938. His collaborators included Oswald Garrison

Villard, former editor of the *Nation*, Norman Thomas, who conceived the organization, and Harry Elmer Barnes.

In early 1941, Flynn became chairman of the New York City America First Committee (NYC-AFC). In this noninterventionist endeavor, he was aided by Barnes, Thomas, Villard, Charles Beard, Sinclair Lewis, and many others. Perhaps the most famous supporter of America First was Charles Lindbergh. Another famous America Firster was the actress Lillian Gish, known from *Birth of a Nation* and other movies, who resigned from the organization after being blacklisted by the motion-picture studios. (That's right, kiddies. Those accused of being Communists are not the only ones who've ever been blacklisted in Hollywood.)

The AFC devoted much effort to noninterventionist propaganda. Flynn gave frequent speeches or radio addresses during 1941. He also wrote or edited all of the NYC-AFC's literature. This included a series of pamphlets about the war situation and the American economy. There was a weekly chapter newsletter, the *AFC Bulletin*, financed with Flynn's own money. And another antiwar weekly, *Uncensored*, was published by the NYC-AFC. The group also published a book, *We Testify*, with noninterventionist opinions expressed by public figures such as Flynn, Amos Pinchot, Lindbergh, Norman Thomas, and Herbert Hoover, among others.

America First members and associates, including Flynn, Lindbergh, Pinchot, Thomas, and Charles Beard, testified at congressional committee hearings to oppose Roosevelt's legislative steps toward war, such as Lend-Lease, the Draft Extension bill of 1941, and the repeal of some sections of the Neutrality Act of 1939. America First also organized mass rallies in opposition to such measures. Unfortunately, Roosevelt won each of those legislative battles. (For a detailed account of Flynn's work with the AFC, see the aforementioned AN AMERICAN FIRST by Michele Flynn Stenehjem.)

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, America First closed up shop, and Flynn expressed support for the war effort. Indeed, when some former associates from the AFC and the Keep America Out of War Congress created a Peace Now organization to advocate negotiated peace, Flynn refused to participate. Supposedly, he personally supported negotiated peace, but, for some reason, believed such a movement was not proper during wartime. (So when would such a movement for a negotiated peace be proper? During peacetime? I must say that, on this point, I find Flynn's point of view perplexing.)

Although Flynn expressed support for the war effort, he was still concerned about America's ballooning national debt resulting from deficit spending for war, which he saw as a prelude to fascism. And so he wrote *As We Go Marching*, published in 1944, an analysis of the development of fascism in Italy and Germany, and of the trends in the U. S. which he saw as leading toward fascism. (unlike some writers who have used "fascism" as a nebulous, undefined, all-purpose smear word, Flynn did define the term in detail.)

Flynn was also critical of Roosevelt's plans for a postwar global organization, which he derisively referred to as "globaloney."

Flynn became an early Pearl Harbor revisionist, perhaps even the first, with the publication of two controversial pamphlets, *The Truth About Pearl Harbor* (1944) and *The Final Secret of Pearl Harbor* (1945). (This latter title was later used by Admiral Robert Theobald for the title of his revisionist book on the Pearl Harbor attack.) In these two pamphlets, Flynn argued that Roosevelt knew in advance

that the attack was coming, but allowed it to happen to inspire popular support for war. Flynn took credit for instigating a second congressional investigation of the attack in 1945 and 1946.

Flynn wrote *The Roosevelt Myth*, published in 1948. (A revised edition, even more critical of Roosevelt, appeared in 1956.) Although Flynn criticized Roosevelt for policies leading toward fascism, he also criticized FDR for allowing Communist infiltration of his administration, though he did not believe Roosevelt to be a Communist himself. In other postwar writings, such as *While You Slept: Our Tragedy in Asia and Who Made It* (1951), Flynn criticized Roosevelt's "collusion" with Communists, which allegedly resulted in the "loss" of China. Meanwhile, at least as late as 1956, he still criticized deficit military spending, and predicted it would lead to the collapse of the economy and bring about fascism.

Although Flynn came to depend more and more on conservative backing for his postwar writings, he didn't always see eye to eye with conservatives. According to Ronald Radosh, in *Prophets on the Right: Profiles of Conservative Critics of American Globalism*, Flynn sent an article attacking the militarism racket to William Buckley, Jr., editor of *National Review*. Buckley rejected it.

In 1958, Flynn's health began to fail and two years later he retired. He died in 1964.

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